

Housing as a Factor in Admissions of Children to Temporary Care: A Survey

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A survey of family service workers at the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto found that in 18.4% of the cases the family's housing situation was one of the factors that resulted in temporary placement of a child into care, and that in 8.6% of the cases the return home of a child was delayed due to a housing-related problem. This evidence that an inadequate family housing situation has a detrimental impact on the welfare of children points to the need for child welfare organizations to pay greater attention to housing policy and program issues relating to their clients.

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The Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto (CAS) is responsible for the protection of children under the age of 16 in Metropolitan Toronto within the mandate of Ontario's Child and Family Services Act. The Society also provides substitute care for children and develops child abuse prevention programs. *Substitute care* is the term for the Children's Aid Society's legal role of placing children who are found to be "in need of protection" in a "place of safety" (such as a family foster home). For many years, housing was recognized as a serious problem in many Children's Aid Society cases, yet its significance as a factor in admissions to care was not measured. The Society's Housing Subcommittee initiated a study in collaboration with its Housing Advocacy Project and with researchers at the University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work.

In 1992, CAS assisted over 9,300 families and 19,800 children. During the 12-month period covered by the research, a total of 957 children were placed in the care of the Society. Some children stayed for very brief periods of time, but length of stay ranged, with some children eventually becoming permanent wards of the Society. A total of 2,502 children were in the care of CAS during 1992. The average duration of voluntary agreements was 15 months; for apprehensions, it was 18 months. In the minority of instances in which a child became a permanent ward of the state, the average duration in CAS care was five years. The average cost of maintaining a child in care was \$1,528 per month in 1992. The vast majority of children assisted in 1992 (17,300) remained in their own family home, at a monthly per capita cost of \$94 in 1992.

Housing is not identified as a concern in Ontario's Child and Family Services Act definition of a "child in need of protection" or as one of the grounds for admitting a child into temporary care. The Act's general criteria specify that children in need of protection include those suffering or at risk of suffering physical harm, sexual molestation and exploitation, or emotional harm; those in need of medical treatment whose parents cannot or will

not give consent, and those who have been abandoned. A small but growing body of literature has been examining the link between certain child welfare problems, such as abuse and neglect, and the housing situation of the family. Two literature reviews have been published. Parke and Collmer [1975] posed the question, "Is there a relationship between the type of housing and type of parental disciplinary tactics generally and child abuse specifically?" While noting that there is little empirical research in this area, they did identify several studies that demonstrated a relationship between housing characteristics such as overcrowding, structural density, and dilapidation, and the type of parental behaviours that are associated with child abuse. A decade later, Zuravin [1985] reviewed the literature again, agreeing with Parke and Collmer that the literature was still far from conclusive, but that there is evidence of links in two areas: occurrences of child neglect and housing problems, and neighbourhood characteristics and rates of reported child abuse and neglect [Zuravin 1985: 13].

As yet, however, little attention has been given to the direct relationship between poor housing conditions and the admission of children into out-of-home care. Poverty and poor housing conditions are indeed recognized risk factors. Wolfe and Jaffe [1991] identified some risk factors that can affect the chances of a child coming into care, including the family being on social assistance or living in public housing, or the child being in a single-parent family. It is also widely recognized that children in homeless families are more likely to be abused and neglected and to enter out-of-home care [Child Welfare League of America 1987: 2]. In a recent study of the incidence of reported child abuse and neglect, Trocmé et al. [1994] identified risk factors that include low income, inadequate housing, whether the family has moved in the past six months, and whether the family lives in public housing. The literature on family preservation also identifies housing conditions as an important factor. Adequate and appropriate housing has been a key element in most of the suc-

cessful family preservation interventions of the past 20 years [Gibson & Noble 1991; Kadushin & Martin 1988; Wolfe & Jaffe 1991; Nelson et al. 1993]. Child welfare experts, therefore, have recognized for some time that inadequate housing can be a risk factor. A great deal more research is needed, however, before the specific nature of the risk factors and the types of housing inadequacies can be better identified.

The Housing Context in Metropolitan Toronto

In Metropolitan Toronto, with a population of 2.3 million people, 52% of the 865,000 households rent their homes [1991 Census]. High rents and a shortage of affordable family-oriented rental housing is a severe problem. In 1991, one-third of all renter households in Metropolitan Toronto spent over 30% of their income on rent (15% spent more than 50%) [Statistics Canada 1993]. Apartment vacancy rates throughout the 1980s averaged below 0.5% (about 3% to 5% is considered necessary for a healthy rental market) [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 1993]. There are not enough social housing units for families in need, and all forms of social housing have long waiting lists. The Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority (MTHA), for example, the largest provider of subsidized housing in Metropolitan Toronto, has a waiting list that has grown from 10,110 individuals in 1989 to 21,086 in 1993. The number of family households with children on the MTHA waiting list increased from 7,300 to 12,500 over the same period. The Metropolitan Toronto Community Services Department reported that during 1992, 2,114 families and 3,594 children used shelters for the homeless at least once. In 1991, 6,100 youths (ages 16 to 24) stayed in shelters in Metropolitan Toronto.

Toronto's housing situation has created affordability and access problems for many households, including many families with children, and young people age 16 and over who live away from their family. The 9,300 families with whom CAS worked in 1992 have a demographic profile that defines them as a group

that faces a far greater degree of economic and social disadvantage than the general population. The 1992 CAS client profile was as follows: 49% single-parent families, predominantly female-headed; 54% families receiving government income support (includes general welfare, family benefits, disability pension, and unemployment insurance); and 33% minority, ethnic, immigrants, or refugee families. CAS clients, therefore, face the greatest disadvantages in finding and keeping safe, appropriate, and affordable housing. Most CAS clients rely on the private rental market for their housing because there are so few social housing options available.

Research Method

In August 1992, the CAS Housing Subcommittee recommended that a study be carried out to provide accurate information on the relationship between specific housing problems and decisions to place children into temporary care. Approval to carry out the study was given by CAS's Service Director and Executive Director. CAS's staff researcher reviewed the questionnaire and provided assistance in such matters as sampling and protecting confidentiality. The draft questionnaire and proposed research method were circulated to a number of housing and child welfare experts for comment. The questionnaire was pretested by a team of family service workers in September 1992, and modifications were made as a result. Family service workers are professional social workers who make assessments and recommendations daily regarding the welfare of children, the decision to admit children into care, and the decision to return children home to their families. They visit families in their homes as a routine practice and have firsthand information to assess family housing circumstances. It is presumed, therefore, that these social workers are in a particularly knowledgeable position about the major factors affecting the families and children with whom they work.

The survey asked family service workers two key questions and a number of follow-up questions about housing conditions facing CAS clients. The two central questions were, "In your opinion, was the family's housing situation one of the factors that resulted in temporary placement of a child/children into care?" and "In your opinion, was there any delay of the return home of the child from care due to any housing-related problem?"

All family service workers employed by CAS in November 1992 were asked to complete a questionnaire on two of their children's case files that were opened between June 1, 1991 and May 30, 1992. A children's case file is opened for every child who is admitted to temporary care. The two case files for each worker were selected on a random basis using a random numbers table to achieve a sample that would adequately represent the population of children admitted to care during the designated period. To ensure confidentiality for both the client and the family service worker, the questionnaires were not coded to track the child's identity or that of the family service workers.

Response Rate

Of the 108 family service workers surveyed, 69 returned their completed questionnaires (a 63.8% return rate). Of the 205 children's cases in the total sample, questionnaires were returned for 128 (a 62.4% return rate). Several family service workers had only one questionnaire to fill out because they had only one case (usually because they were newly employed during the period covered by the research). This relatively high response rate and the random sampling technique allows us to be confident that the findings from this sample can be generalized to other CAS admissions of children to care.

Sample

The families and children in the random sample had the following characteristics:

- Sixty-eight percent of the children were from single-parent families.
- The estimated monthly family income (median) was \$1,225.
- Seventy percent of the families received welfare/family benefits.
- Five percent of the families received unemployment insurance.
- Twenty-three percent of the families lived in public housing.
- The median age of the child placed into care was 6.5 years.
- Fifty-three percent of the children were male and 47% were female.

In 68% of the cases, the child came into care as an apprehension under the Child and Family Services Act because the child was deemed to be in need of protection.

In the sample cases, we attempted to determine the procedure by which each child was admitted into care. There are two ways that a child under 16 years of age can come into the care of CAS. The first is by a voluntary agreement, used in cases where there is parental consent (and consent of children aged 12 and over), and where the child is not in immediate danger or imminent risk for abuse. Children generally are admitted under this provision in situations that are less serious than those meriting apprehensions. The second process is an apprehension, whereby CAS, with or without parental consent, takes a child into care, and brings the case before the family court judge within five days of admission for a finding and a decision on the length of time the child will be in care. This provision is used where a child is deemed to face immediate risk for abuse, neglect, abandonment, or other conditions specified by the Child and Family Services Act. In both situations, an assessment must be made that the child is in "need of protection" as defined by the legislation and that removing the child from the family is the "least intrusive"

course of action and is “in the best interests of the child.” In this survey’s sample, 68% of the children came into care by apprehension and 32% by voluntary agreement. The primary reasons for admission of children to care were as follows: 43% suffered physical harm or were at risk of physical harm; 15% suffered emotional harm or were at substantial risk for emotional harm; 18% were abandoned; and 7% suffered sexual abuse or were at substantial risk of abuse. Twenty-seven percent came into care for other protection reasons.

Survey Findings

Housing as a Factor in Temporary Placement

In 18.4% of the cases,* the family’s housing situation was identified by the family service worker as “one of the factors that resulted in temporary placement of a child/children into care.” This finding is consistent with the literature cited earlier, but it is an important finding, not only because it is the first quantitative indication of the extent to which housing is a factor, but because the percentage of cases involving housing is high (much greater than members of the research team had expected). This finding, however, must be used with some caution. It is a good *indication* of the extent to which housing is a factor because it is based on the opinion (and recollection) of the family service workers. In addition, the study design does not provide an adequate scale for assessing what is meant by “one of the factors.” Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that because the family service workers routinely make home visits, they do have firsthand knowledge of the housing situation of their clients. Part of the family service workers’ responsibility is to assess the financial condition of the

*Confidence levels for the principal findings are satisfactory. The key finding that in 18.4% of the cases the family’s housing situation was reported to be a factor resulting in placement of a child or children in care has a confidence level of $\pm 6.5\%$ (19 times out of 20). All the key findings have confidence levels between $\pm 5.0\%$ and $\pm 6.5\%$ (19 times out of 20).

families they work with because income problems may affect family stress and parental ability to care for children adequately. Housing is the single largest budget item for low-income households.

This finding is also important in terms of child welfare education and legislation, since housing problems are generally not an important part of social work curriculums and, in regard to Ontario, inadequate housing or severe housing problems are not sufficient grounds to find a child in need of protection, or to initiate a voluntary agreement. Social workers use community services such as shelters and legal clinics to help families who are homeless or who have severe housing problems. Assisting families with specific housing problems (which need to be better identified) may reduce the risks of child abuse and neglect, and may prevent some admissions to care.

One interesting finding that requires further study and analysis was the breakdown between apprehensions and voluntary agreements in the total sample, as compared to the 18.4% of the sample where housing was identified as a factor in the child's admission to care. Apprehensions are generally associated with serious child welfare problems, including physical and sexual abuse, abandonment, or refusal to provide medical treatment. Voluntary agreements, according to the legislation, should not be undertaken where a child may be at serious risk for abuse or neglect. In this study, 74% of the cases where housing was a factor involved apprehensions. In contrast, for the total sample, 68% of the cases involved children who came into care by apprehension. This suggests that in the cases where housing was a factor, serious child protection concerns were identified.

Common Family Housing Problems

Where housing was a factor in the placement of a child into care, the most common housing problems were eviction, difficulty in paying the rent, and no permanent family home (e.g., transient or living in a shelter). For the 18.4% of the cases in which housing

was one of the factors, respondents were asked to identify what type of housing problem was involved (they could check off more than one). Table 1 indicates that the family service workers, in assessing whether children should be placed into care, are recognizing and examining the links between income problems (difficulties paying rent), the severity of the housing situation of their clients (eviction, no permanent home, transient, living in a shelter), and the adequacy of their housing (overcrowding, housing below basic standards). These findings reflect what is known of the current housing realities in Metropolitan Toronto that face the clients of CAS, given the demographic profile of the client population. Many are single-parent, female-headed families who are among the poorest families in Metropolitan Toronto and have the most difficulties finding housing that has sufficient space, that is affordable, and that meets building and fire safety standards.

Affordable, Safe, and Appropriate Family Housing

Family service workers were asked to assess whether the family of the child had housing that was affordable, safe, and appropriate. In 23% of the 128 cases, families "did not have housing that would be affordable now," and in 14% of the 128 cases, families did not have housing considered "safe and appropriate to meet their physical housing needs." These results indicate that there is the potential for housing to become a factor in a growing number of cases if the affordability problem becomes worse for the family and/or if there is a deterioration in the safety or appropriateness (e.g., overcrowding) of the family's home.

Housing as a Factor in Continuing to Keep a Child in Care

In the cases where the child had not been returned home to the family, housing considerations were a factor in preventing the return home of the child in a number of cases. In over half of the cases in the entire sample (67 of 128), the child had not yet been returned to the family and the family service worker was asked

TABLE 1

Type of Housing Problems and Importance to Reason for Placement in Care in Cases Where Housing was a Factor in Placement

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Somewhat Important*</i>	<i>Important or Very Important*</i>
Eviction situation (n = 9)		67%
Difficulties paying rent (n = 14)		64%
Housing is below basic standards (n = 13)	23%	31%
No permanent home (transient or living in a shelter (n = 14)	14%	50%
Overcrowding—insufficient living space (n = 10)	10%	40%
Overcrowding—four or more children, not enough bedrooms (n = 7)		29%

*Excludes "don't know" and "not applicable" responses.

to identify whether housing was a factor delaying the return. Table 2 summarizes the nature of the housing factor or factors involved. Where the question did apply and the respondent was able to answer (in about half of the 67 cases), the first five factors were about equally important (13% to 17%), and the last factor, "no permanent home for the family," was important or very important in 45% of the cases.

Housing as a Factor in a Child's Return Home

The children in half the cases in the survey had been returned to their families since initial placement. In 18% of the cases where the child was returned home to the family, "the family's housing situation" was "one factor in the decision to return the child home." In these cases, the respondent was asked to identify the nature of the housing factor or factors involved. Table 3 provides a summary. Housing can become an issue for the Children's Aid Society once a child is in care, whether or not housing was a factor leading to the placement of the child into care. Family service workers must satisfy CAS and the courts that the family has appropriate accommodation for the child when they are

TABLE 2

Nature of the Housing Factor(s) and Importance to Continued Placement in Care in Cases Where Housing was a Factor in Child's Continuation in Care

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Somewhat Important*</i>	<i>Important or Very Important*</i>
Inadequate amount of living space (n = 30)	7%	17%
Inadequate health standards (n = 28)	0	14%
Inadequate income (n = 30)	17%	13%
No affordable housing for the family (n = 23)	13%	17%
No first and last months rent (n = 23)	4%	17%
No permanent home for the family (n = 20)	5%	45%

*Excludes "don't know" and "not applicable" responses.

developing plans to return a child to the family. A home visit is part of the usual practice in assessing the plan to reunify the family. CAS has no prescribed criteria for adequate and safe housing; this determination is made on a case-by-case situation.

CAS rarely returns a child to a family that is homeless, living in a temporary hostel, or without permanent accommodation. Therefore, although housing is not one of the criteria for a legal assessment of a child's "need of protection" precipitating admission into care, it becomes a necessary requirement for families when CAS is working toward returning children from care. Housing considerations are therefore significant in the decision to return children to their families.

Housing as a Factor in Delaying the Child's Return Home

Family service workers for all cases in the sample were asked if return home of the child from care was delayed due to any housing-related problem. In 8.6% of the cases, the return home of a child from temporary care was delayed due to a housing-related problem. In the cases where return home was delayed, the respondent was then asked to estimate the length of the delay. This question assessed the degree to which housing conditions were estimated to have had an impact on delaying the return home of

TABLE 3

Nature of the Housing Factor(s) and Importance to Child's Return to Home in Cases Where Housing was a Factor in Decision to Return Child to the Family

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Somewhat Important*</i>	<i>Important or Very Important*</i>
Adequate amount of living space (n = 9)	22%	78%
Adequate health and safety standards (n = 8)	38%	72%
Adequate income (n = 3)	33%	67%
Affordable housing for the family (n = 5)		100%
First and last months rent needed (n = 3)	67%	33%
Permanent home for the family (n = 5)		100%

*Excludes "don't know" and "not applicable" responses.

the child, from among the total sample of children being admitted to care, not just those where the family service worker indicated that housing was a factor at the time of admission. An answer was given for eight of the cases: one month delay in two cases, two months delay in five cases, and four months delay in one case. Whether or not housing is a factor in the initial decision to place a child in care, the family may subsequently develop a severe housing problem and the family service worker would be unlikely to return the child to the family until stable and permanent housing arrangements could be obtained. CAS, as the temporary "parent," assumes a responsibility to postpone the return of a child until an assessment is made that the family has obtained appropriate and permanent housing.

Conclusion

This survey indicates that Metropolitan Toronto's housing situation is having a detrimental impact on the well-being of a considerable number of families with children. The families and children who are clients of the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto are among the most economically disadvantaged in Ontario. These families face substantial obstacles to obtaining adequate and appropriate housing in Metropolitan Toronto's

housing market and this may have an impact on their ability to care for their children.

The finding that the family's housing situation was one of the factors that resulted in the temporary placement of a child or children into care in 18.4% of the cases surveyed is an indicator of how serious the situation is for many families. Applying this finding to the total number of children taken into care during the 12-month period covered by the survey (957) means that between 115 and 239 children may have come into temporary care, in the opinion of the family service workers, due in part to the family's housing situation (based on the confidence level of $\pm 6.5\%$). This survey also found that housing could delay the return of children to their families.

The financial cost of taking children into care is very high, averaging about \$23,000 per child (based on the CAS 1992 estimate for an average month in care, at \$1,528 per month per child, and 15 months as the average length of time in temporary care). This means that the cases where housing was a factor cost somewhere between \$2.6 million and \$5.5 million (based on the 115 to 239 referred to above). The financial impact of child admissions to care does not address the social and emotional impacts of a child being placed in out-of-home care. Placement in out-of-home care is an intervention of last resort for CAS because of years of experience and research on the negative consequences of removing children from their parents. Although this study cannot state that housing *caused* admissions of children to care, or that it was the sole factor in that decision, it has been identified as a factor in 18.4% of cases, which indicates a significant connection between housing and child admissions into care.

The finding that housing is a significant factor in at least a substantial minority of cases has implications for the legal definition of the grounds for admission of children to temporary care. Housing is not one of the grounds specified in child welfare legislation in Ontario. This needs further research and analysis. The finding also suggests that a proportion of CAS's budget for

in-care cost is associated with the inability of some families in Metropolitan Toronto to obtain adequate housing. This suggests that confronting housing needs may be important in reducing child admissions and in facilitating the return of children to their families. The weak connection between child welfare services and housing policy and programs ought to be strengthened.

Access to safe and affordable housing will not necessarily prevent child admissions to CAS care, but housing support may reduce the number of admissions, stabilize the family's living situation in ways that promote children's well-being, and reduce housing-related delays in the return of children to their homes. This study, finally, raises the question, "Could the number of children removed from their homes because of alleged child abuse and neglect be reduced if more families had access to affordable, adequate and appropriate housing?" This is a critical question requiring attention from all child welfare organizations, all levels of government, and the community. ♦

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